

What is claimed is:

1. A system for detecting the level of liquid in a vessel, comprising:

a detector assembly including

a thermally conductive substrate,

5 an heater mounted on said substrate such that said heater is thermally coupled to the interior of the vessel, said heater being able to be actuated to add heat to the surface of the substrate thermally coupled to the interior of the vessel, and

10 a sensor mounted on said substrate in proximity to said heater such that discrete elevations of the interior of the vessel are thermally coupled to corresponding longitudinal portions of said sensor to generate an electrical signal defining a temperature  
15 signal, said correspondence being incrementally continuous such that the elevations corresponding to said portions of said sensor increase from one to the other of the ends of said sensor, said sensor being able to be actuated to detect the temperature in the vessel in  
20 proximity to the sensor indicative of the temperature detected by said sensor, said sensor having a vertical dimension sufficiently large such that said temperature signal will vary in proportion to said longitudinal portion of said sensor thermally coupled to the liquid;

25 a processor electrically connected to said sensor for receiving said temperature signal after actuation of said heater, said processor being programmed to use said temperature signal to calculate the elevation of the

upper surface of the liquid in the vessel thereby to  
30 generate an electrical signal defining an elevation  
signal indicative of the elevation of the liquid upper  
surface relative to the lower end of said sensor;  
an interface electrically connected to said  
processor for receiving said elevation signal for use as  
35 the basis for communicating to the user the elevation of  
the liquid upper surface; and  
a power supply electrically connected to said  
heater, sensor, processor, and interface.

2. A system as set forth in claim 1, wherein said  
longitudinal portions of said sensor define a  
longitudinal axis of said sensor having a vertical  
orientation.

3. A system as set forth in claim 1, wherein said  
lower end of said sensor is positioned above the lower  
inner surface of the vessel by a vertical clearance,  
said processor being programmed further to interpret  
5 the elevation signal to be indicative of the elevation of  
the liquid upper surface relative to the lower end of  
said sensor and of said vertical clearance such that said  
interface communicates to the user the elevation of the  
liquid upper surface relative to the lower inner surface  
10 of the vessel.

4. A system as set forth in claim 1, wherein said sensor comprises a potentiometer wherein the resistance to electrical conductivity of said sensor varies in proportion to the temperature detected by it, said temperature signal being equal to said resistance,

said programming of said processor comprising using said temperature signal to measure said resistance of said sensor, said programming further comprising using said resistance to calculate the elevation of the liquid upper surface.

5. A system as set forth in claim 4, wherein said sensor is defined by an intermediate sensor, said system further comprising:

an upper sensor mounted on said substrate adjacent to the upper end of said intermediate sensor; and

a lower sensor adjacent to the lower end of said intermediate sensor,

said upper and lower sensors being thermally coupled to the interior of the vessel to detect the respective temperatures therein in proximity to said upper and lower sensors,

said upper and lower sensors being able to be actuated to produce respective electrical signals defining temperature signals indicative of the respective temperatures detected by them, said upper and lower sensors each comprising a potentiometer wherein the resistance to electrical conductivity of each of said upper and lower sensors varies in proportion to the

20 respective temperatures detected by them, said  
temperature signals of said upper and lower sensors being  
equal to said respective resistance values thereof,

said processor being further programmed to calculate  
the distance between said lower sensor and the liquid  
upper surface according to the following equation:

25

$$l = \frac{R_i - R_{vp}}{R_{lq} - R_{vp}}$$

30 where  $l$  = longitudinal fraction of said intermediate  
sensor below said liquid upper surface;

$R_i$  = resistance of said intermediate sensor;

35  $R_{vp}$  = resistance of said upper sensor when exposed to  
vapor only; and

$R_{lq}$  = resistance of said lower sensor when exposed to  
liquid only,

40 said processor being further programmed to calculate  
the vertical component of " $l$ " for use as the basis for  
said generation of said elevation signal.

6. A system as set forth in claim 5, wherein said  
intermediate sensor has a longitudinal axis, said  
intermediate sensor being oriented such that said  
longitudinal axis is vertical,

5 said processor being further programmed such that  
said vertical component equals " $l$ ".

7. A system as set forth in claim 4, wherein said sensor is defined by an intermediate sensor, said system further comprising:

an upper sensor mounted on said substrate adjacent  
5 to the upper end of said intermediate sensor; and

a lower sensor adjacent to the lower end of said intermediate sensor,

said upper and lower sensors being thermally coupled to the interior of the vessel to detect the respective  
10 temperatures therein in proximity to said upper and lower sensors,

said upper and lower sensors being able to be actuated to produce respective electrical signals defining temperature signals indicative of the respective  
15 temperatures detected by them, said upper and lower sensors each comprising a potentiometer wherein the resistance to electrical conductivity of each of said upper and lower sensors varies in proportion to the respective temperatures detected by them, said  
20 temperature signals of said upper and lower sensors being equal to said respective resistance values thereof,

said processor being further programmed to calculate the distance between said lower sensor and the liquid upper surface according to the following equation:

25

$$l = \frac{R_1 - R_{vp}}{R_{1q} - R_{vp}}$$

30

where  $l$  = number of increments between a lower end of  
said intermediate sensor and the liquid upper  
surface;

35

$L$  = total number of increments between an upper end  
and said lower end of said intermediate sensor  
(any number of increments are possible, higher  
number increases resolution of calculation and  
the actual count is arbitrary and determined  
only by resolution requirements);

40

$R_i$  = resistance of said intermediate sensor;

45

$R_{vp}$  = resistance of said upper sensor without  
scaling;

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$R_{vp'}$  = resistance of said upper sensor at the  
observed temperature when exposed to vapor  
only, scaled by dividing by the total number  
of increments; and

55

$R_{lq'}$  = resistance of said lower sensor at the  
observed temperature when exposed to liquid  
only, scaled by dividing by the total number  
of increments;

said processor being further programmed to calculate  
the vertical component of " $l$ " for use as the basis for  
said generation of said elevation signal.

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8. A system as set forth in claim 7, wherein said  
intermediate sensor has a longitudinal axis, said  
intermediate sensor being oriented such that said  
longitudinal axis is vertical,

5

said processor being further programmed such that  
said vertical component equals " $l$ ".

9. A system as set forth in claim 4, wherein said heater is constituted by said sensor.

10. A system as set forth in claim 1, wherein said sensor is disposed in the interior of the vessel.

11. A system for detecting the level of liquid in a vessel, comprising:

a detector assembly including

a thermally conductive substrate,

5 a heater mounted on said substrate such that said heater is thermally coupled to the interior of the vessel, said heater being able to be actuated to add heat to the surface of the substrate thermally coupled to the interior of the vessel, and

10 upper, intermediate and lower sensors mounted on said substrate in proximity to said heater, said upper sensor being at a higher elevation relative to said lower sensor, said intermediate sensor being at an elevation between said upper and lower sensors, said upper and  
15 lower sensors being thermally coupled to the interior of the vessel to detect the temperature therein in proximity to said upper and lower sensors, said upper and lower sensors being able to be actuated to generate respective electrical signals each defining a temperature signal  
20 indicative of said temperatures detected by said upper and lower sensors, said intermediate sensor being mounted on said substrate such that discrete elevations of the interior of the vessel are thermally coupled to

corresponding longitudinal portions of said intermediate  
 25 sensor to detect the temperature in the vessel in  
 proximity to the sensor, said correspondence being  
 incrementally continuous such that the elevations  
 corresponding to said portions of said intermediate  
 sensor increase from one to the other of the ends of said  
 30 intermediate sensor, said intermediate sensor being able  
 to be actuated to generate an electrical signal defining  
 a temperature signal indicative of the temperature  
 detected by said intermediate sensor, said intermediate  
 sensor having a vertical dimension sufficiently large  
 35 such that said temperature signal will vary in proportion  
 to said longitudinal portion of said intermediate sensor  
 thermally coupled to the liquid;

a processor electrically connected to each of said  
 sensors for receiving said temperature signals after  
 40 actuation of said heater, said processor being programmed  
 to use said temperature signals to calculate the  
 elevation of the upper surface of the liquid in the  
 vessel thereby to generate an electrical signal defining  
 an elevation signal indicative of the elevation of the  
 45 liquid upper surface;

an interface electrically connected to said  
 processor for receiving said elevation signal for use as  
 the basis for communicating to the user the elevation of  
 the liquid upper surface; and

50 a power supply electrically connected to said  
 heater, intermediate sensor, lower sensor, upper sensor,  
 processor, and interface.

12. A system as set forth in claim 11, wherein said processor comprises an electronic microprocessor.